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ABSTRACT

Wesley College, a private urban secondary school, operates a campus in the small, rural town of Clunes, Victoria (Australia), where ninth-grade students can spend a term in a community-based, experientially-derived curriculum to enhance their sense of self and community. Students are accommodated in houses of eight as single-sex groups and are responsible for their own daily living duties. A study of 22 students examined the extent to which they developed their sense of identity and place in a community. Preliminary findings from standardized tests; focus groups, participant observations, teacher comments, questionnaires, and interviews indicate that students derived considerable and multiple benefits from their residential campus experiences at Clunes. While the experiences and benefits differed for individuals, most students made progress in self-concept, approach to learning, and understanding of community. Some student comments suggested latent or actual tensions concerning developments made in self-concept following their return to the metropolitan campuses. Progress in students' understandings of their approaches to learning may be limited by treating the term as a "contained" 8-week residential experience. Considerable gains would be more likely if the experience was integrated into a whole-school experience and longitudinal synergies existed between each of the Wesley campuses. (TD)

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The Self, the Spirit and the Social Being: The Formation of Adolescent Identity within Community-Wesley College at Clunes

Doug Lloyd and Sharon McDonough

(AARE 2001, LLO01455)

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The self, the spirit and the social being: The formation of adolescent identity within community - Wesley College at Clunes

Doug Lloyd and Sharon McDonough

(AARE 2001, LLO01455)

Abstract

This paper will explore the impact of a Wesley College educational initiative upon the formation of identity in adolescents. Year Nine students from Wesley college, a large, predominantly metropolitan based private college, spend eight weeks in a residential learning village situated in the small rural town of Clunes, where they explore the factors connected with the domains of self, spirit and social being within the context of living as a member of a community.

This research is part of a natural experiment where a metropolitan-based college implements a semi-structured curriculum in a small country town. The results demonstrate that young people living and working in this community develop a stronger sense of their adolescent identity. In particular the curriculum addresses issues of personal learning styles, shared experience and purpose and an understanding of identity within a broader community.

The research provides some understandings about an educational approach where a college embeds itself in a small rural community, through which students develop a greater understanding of self, community and their roles in communities.

Background

Wesley College, one of Australia's largest private colleges, has operated a campus in a small central Victorian town, Clunes, since 2000. Approximately 100 year 9 students leave one of Wesley's three metropolitan Melbourne campuses to spend eight weeks in their residential village in the centre of Clunes, joining the ~800 'households' in the rural community ~150 km from Melbourne. As recently as 1994, a tourist guidebook described this historic gold mining hamlet as a ghost town.

Wesley College's interest is in a location where a majority of its year 9 students can spend some time in a community-based experientially-derived curriculum to enhance their sense of self, particularly their sense of community and their role in communities. The Clunes community and its Shire accepted Wesley's initiative and presence as a contributor to Clunes' development and sustainability.

The residential learning village in Clunes accommodates four student groups of 104 students, one per term, each year. They are accommodated on houses of eight as single sex groups for eight weeks, during which they are responsible for their own daily living duties. Their study program comprises courses and electives related to the College's beliefs in the education of the whole person in the community (Loader, 1997; *Wesley's Wider World*, 1999). As a result there is some encouragement for students to seek to contribute to links between the College and Clunes community through their programs in a way that remains discretionary.

A partnership has developed between Wesley and the University of Ballarat to enhance the understandings of the learning and curriculum associated with this 'natural experiment', and to assess the sustainability of the venture and mutual benefits for the University, College and Clunes community. Elements of the partnership do or may include researching the 'experiment', curriculum development, staff development, community development, and collaborative course development.

This is one of three 'work-in-progress' papers describing aspects of the research element of the partnership. It explores the extent to which Wesley College students develop their sense of adolescent identity and place in a community, and some prospective elements of those questions. The particular elements of identity being explored as key representatives are each student's understanding of self-concept (Marsh, 1990), approach to learning (Biggs, 1987) and understanding of community. The

RC 23573

study is a snapshot of students' identity formation within the present curriculum and community contexts. It will provide a case study and some baseline data for the development of the learning processes, and provide a potential indicator for future curriculum and College-community relationship development.

Two other 'work-in-progress' papers being presented at this conference consider preliminary results of the study of how Clunes community members believe Wesley College has integrated into, and contributed to the community (Lloyd and Downey, 2001, LLO01457) and broader perspectives on the emerging relationship between Clunes and Wesley College (Lloyd, Downey and McDonough, 2001, LLO01400). Elaborations of each of these subjects and others will be presented when more detailed analyses are completed.

Data Collection and Analysis

This research is an exploratory case study using multiple methods of data collection. These include, for or on students, a Self-Description Questionnaire II, SDQ-II (Marsh, 1990), approach to learning (Biggs, 1987) standardized tests, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, participant observations, and a structured schedule for comments by teachers. SDQ-II, LPQ and interviews were conducted pre- and post-experience, and focus groups were conducted midway through the eight-week program. Stratified systematic sampling was used to obtain a group of twenty-two year nine students attending the Wesley College village in Clunes during term three in 2001. Qualitative data analyses were based on both coding techniques as described by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Strauss and Corbin (1990), and on the elements identified above as significant to the study. Analyses of the tests is being conducted using the standardized scoring procedures for each and will be subject to statistical analyses. Only those data derived from the first data sets are discussed in this paper.

Results and discussion

Preliminary results of data analyses show changes in some students' approaches to and depth of understanding of their learning, perceptions of community and their role in it, relationships with peers and home environments, and perceptions of teachers and school life. Each of these has implications for the College and its curriculum, and the College's relationship with the Clunes community (at least).

It would be easy to represent the preliminary findings as broadly generalisable, or applying to all students attending the residential village. The research findings are an important reminder of the individual approaches and characters of students participating in the experience. Results reported here are preliminary 'headlines' and those that emerge as of general significance for this student group within the context of the present curriculum and community setting.

Students' relationship with peers

- The challenges associated with students living in close proximity to seven peers, sharing time and space, and undertaking a lengthy daily schedule of duties associated with both household living and course duties is a new and positive learning experience for a significant majority of students. They report development of their abilities to manage daily living in the village and in their skills in collaborating with peers of either sex.
- Students who interacted with 'peers' in the Clunes community that resulted in them taking part significantly in its rhythms and activities, therefore becoming like community members, were in a small minority. These students initiated contact early, reported positive relationships and derived high levels of satisfaction from the interaction.
- The majority of students did not interact significantly with 'peers' in the Clunes community. There is some evidence to suggest that some students did not interact because there is a heavy emphasis on sporting links between the two groups, in which these students do not have an interest. Another contributing reason is that the Wesley students have a desire to establish relationships with Wesley peers because they are easier to maintain than those with Clunes teenagers
- A small sample of students held stereotypical, often negative images of local rural-based

adolescents at the commencement of their stay. This view generally moderated through the period as a result of some social contact some of which was 'centrally' organised, vicarious community contact, and word of mouth from peers. Their views became more understanding and tolerant of individual differences and circumstances.

Students' approaches to, and depth of understanding of their learning

- Pre- and post-experience interviews with students generally indicate some development in this area, although the extent of the development will not be confirmed until analyses of the test data are completed. Students seem to be likely to demonstrate a greater degree of understanding about their learning styles and preferences post-experience, and be able to identify contributing factors or elements of their approaches to learning. Elements of the experience that contribute to these developments are likely to be numerous (and potentially difficult to differentiate), and the interactions between them potentially complex. Those on which data seem to be available include the style of this learning environment, previous learning environments and/or meta-cognition experiences, the approach of teachers/leaders on this campus, the integration of their about 'in-school' and 'in-house' learning, and the explicit opportunities to reflect on their approaches to learning. Some of these are identified in more detail in other sections of the results. Test data are being analysed for corroborating evidence for the levels of development and/or contributing factors.
- Students impressed the researchers by the extent to which they were prepared and able to reflect and articulate on the way their experiences contributed to their learning, and elaborate their approaches to, or changes in their approach to learning as a result of the experiences.

Students' understandings of community and their role(s) in it or them

- A majority of students undertook some curriculum-related work that brought them into direct contact with Clunes community members. An example is regular morning walks with older citizens. There is evidence that this contact helped students: become clearer on the nature of community and the relationships that exist in it; derive some satisfaction from being part of a network within the community; recognize a range of different individuals, roles and interactions within a community; make comparisons between a rural and metropolitan community; and enhance their appreciation of (and tolerance towards) individual and community differences. Some of the evidence for developments in this (and relationships with teachers and community-based peers) derives from changes in the Wesley students' use of language through the period of their stay.
- Students are likely to identify differentiating characteristics associated with Clunes compared with their Melbourne suburban experiences of a 'community'. It appears that some of this sensitivity to community may derive from several different sources, possibly different ones for different students. These include the community focus of the campus and learning experiences, their presence in the smaller and more 'contained' Clunes community, and their activities within the community.

Students' (prospective) relationships with home environments

- In reporting developments in, or consolidation of their capabilities to manage, or contribute to the management of households, students also identified potential tensions associated with return home. One tension is the extent to which students might want their new talents to be recognised and called upon in a home environment, and consequently create a risk to youthful 'freedom'.
- A deeper potential issue related to the extent to which newly developed or developing independence in learning and living styles would be understood, encouraged and facilitated on return. This was a significant and worrying issue for a number of students at the beginning of their time in Clunes, and one that constitutes a potential threat to their strengthened self-concept. At the

conclusion of their eight-week stay only a small minority of students expressed this concern. This issue, as expressed early in students' stay, has lasting parallels in the students' return to their metropolitan College environment, and is discussed further below.

Students' perceptions of teachers

- One of the universally identified features of the students' experience is the difference between their relationships with teachers, or 'leaders' as these students now refer to them, in this environment and their metropolitan experiences. This finding has many aspects and shades of interpretation by individual students, but is regarded as a positive difference. This aspect will be elaborated when further analyses are completed. Components are likely to include regard for students' right of choice in curriculum, close friendships of family-style relationships between students and staff, high degrees of trust and absence of power-based agenda in working and personal relationships, (more) egalitarian approaches to relationships, and mentoring and leading students in a process designed to have each students take personal responsibility for their own learning.

Students' perceptions of school/College

- These relate to, and extend the findings derived from perceptions of 'teachers' and teaching/learning. They also relate to differences across the three metropolitan campuses from which students come, including the nature of their curriculum and the extent of their preparation for, and de-briefing following the Clunes residential experience. While this was not an explicit part of the research question for the study, students' comments frequently refer directly or through comparisons with the Clunes experiences to aspects of the issue. Some students speak apprehensively about: the extent to which their metropolitan experiences as learners will draw on and extend their heuristic experiences from Clunes; rigidity they will experience in the curriculum; relative insensitivity to their learning interests, approaches or styles; more formal or restrictive relationships with College personnel; and regression in their progress towards independence in, and/or control of their learning. Further analysis (and possibly research) is necessary before these findings can be elaborated and differentiated, including across the originating campuses for the students.

Conclusions

In the early stages of Wesley College's operation of its rural campus, these preliminary results indicate that students derive considerable and multiple benefits from their residential campus experiences at Clunes. While the experiences and benefits differ for individuals, there is evidence that the students make progress in each of the key elements of identity used as a framework for data collection; self-concept, approach to learning and understanding of community.

There are suggestions from students' comments that some latent or actual tensions exist concerning some of the developments that are likely to have been made in self concept following their return home and to one or more of the metropolitan campuses. This is an issue that requires elaboration and attention.

There is also a need to undertake further analyses to determine the nature and extent of progress in students' understandings of their approaches to learning, particularly in assessing the likelihood of significant gains in this area if the experience is considered and treated as a 'contained' eight-week residential experience. It appears likely that considerable gains would be more likely if the experience is integrated into a whole-of-College experience and longitudinal synergies exist between and across each of the Wesley campuses, and are as focused as possible on learning for each participating students and staff member.

Some of these conclusions, particularly those related to the Clunes campus curriculum, College-wide perspectives on the residential experience, and interactions between Wesley College and the Clunes community, will be discussed further in the companion session (Lloyd, Downer and McDonough, 2001, LLO01400).

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